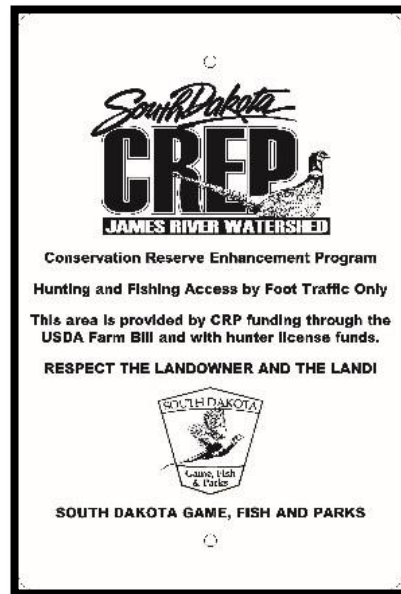


Hunter Evaluation of South Dakota Walk-In Areas: 2020 Survey Report Executive Summary



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The primary goal of the Walk-In Area (WIA) Program is to provide the best possible access to high quality habitat on private land. Historically the program has focused on providing access to lands west of the Missouri River (West River) for big game hunting opportunities; however, recently the focus has also included enrollments east of the Missouri River (East River) where additional public access for pheasant hunting is needed (SDGFP 2021b).

Beginning in 1999 GFP periodically conducts hunter surveys to evaluate the WIA program (Gigliotti 2000, 2006, and 2010; Longmire 2019). We conducted the 2020 *Hunter Evaluation of South Dakota Walk-In Areas (WIAs) Survey*, which builds on earlier hunter evaluation of WIAs in South Dakota. The purpose of this survey is to measure the use of the different land types for various kinds of hunting, and if they hunted WIAs, to obtain hunters' assessment of habitat and perceived crowding while hunting on WIA and CREP lands, and the role they play in hunters' ability to hunt. This report summarizes 2020 survey findings. Information was collected from randomly selected 2020 hunting license holders (N=7,500) using mixed modes approach. Initially participants were offered the opportunity to participate via online survey through a secure link. Those who did not respond were mailed a paper version of the survey. A reminder post card offered respondents the choice of online or paper survey mode. Adjusting for undeliverable, opt-out, and ineligible surveys, we received 2,210 completed surveys (32% response rate) with a margin of sampling error of ± 2 percent overall.

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Executive Summary

The primary goal of the Walk-In Area (WIA) Program is to provide the best possible access to high quality habitat on private land. Historically the program has focused on providing access to lands west of the Missouri River (West River) for big game hunting opportunities; however, recently the focus has also included enrollments east of the Missouri River (East River) where additional public access for pheasant hunting is needed (SDGFP 2021b). Beginning in 1999, GFP periodically conducts hunter surveys to evaluate the WIA program (Gigliotti 2000, 2006, and 2010; Longmire 2019). We conducted the 2020 *Hunter Evaluation of South Dakota Walk-In Areas (WIAs) Survey*, which builds on earlier hunter evaluation of WIAs in South Dakota. The purpose of this survey is to measure the use of the different land types for various kinds of hunting, and if they hunted WIAs, to obtain hunters' assessment of habitat on WIAs, and the role they play in hunters' ability to hunt. This survey also measures levels of perceived crowding on WIA and CREP lands and whether there is an association with overall satisfaction with their hunting experience.

This executive summary shares all major findings but it is not an exhaustive statistical review and synthesis of all data collected, nor does it provide program management recommendations. It is important to note, in the quantitative data there are often nuanced and important proportional response differences overall, as well as between resident and non-resident hunters. Additionally, qualitative data that typically arises from open-ended survey questions provides rich descriptions and important details from the perspective of the participant. Both forms of data should be synthesized together to inform program decisions and outreach strategies. When necessary, report page numbers are given for additional information.

Survey Sample

- A total of **2,210 responses** were received (65% residents and 35% non-residents). Correcting for undeliverable addresses, the total survey response rate was **32% with a margin of sampling error of ± 2 percent, overall**. In 2015, after correcting for undeliverable addresses, the total survey response rate was 46% with the same margin of sampling error of ± 2 percent, overall.
- **65% of responding hunters were South Dakota residents. Non-resident hunters represented 45 states, of which the largest proportion were from Minnesota (11%).**
- **48% of resident hunters and 57% of non-resident hunters were 50 – 69 years old and male.**
- **12% of survey respondents did not hunt in South Dakota during 2020.** Of reasons given for why they did not hunt in South Dakota in 2020, 43% selected COVID-19 considerations and about one-third selected time constraints.

Overall Evaluation of Walk-In Areas

- Half of the respondents said they **hunted South Dakota WIAs during 2020**. This is about a 10% increase from 2015.
- Three-quarters of all hunters were **somewhat or very satisfied with the 2020 Walk-In Area Program**, while 12% were somewhat or very dissatisfied. In 2015, 73% of hunters indicated they were satisfied and 16% were dissatisfied with the 2015 WIA Program.
- **98% of hunters intend to use South Dakota WIAs in the future.**
- For about half of the respondents, their **most preferred species to hunt on South Dakota WIAs is pheasant**, which was also the preferred species in 2015. It is important to note that, overall, about 10% of hunters selected other game species and of these 72% selected multiple species from the primary list (e.g., deer, waterfowl, and pheasant) and 33% listed other species (e.g., rabbit, prairie dog, coyote, elk, bobcat, dove, squirrel).
- To understand the factors that influenced **hunter decision-making about whether to hunt South Dakota WIAs during 2020**, survey participants were asked to use a Likert-type scale (1=no influence, 2=slightly influential, 3=moderately influential, 4=very influential, 5=extremely influential) to rate the level of influence of 10 statements.

Respondents were not asked to rank factors that influence hunter decision-making whether to hunt South Dakota Walk-In Areas during 2020. Based on reported mode counts (Table 13, pg. 68) and proportional responses (Figures 56 – 65, pp. 69 -78), the list can be broadly summarized as follows:

Factors that are very influential

- I didn't have to secure permission to hunt a WIA
- It is easy to locate WIAs using GFP maps
- I have hunted WIAs in the past
- Quality wildlife habitat available on WIAs
- Opportunity to harvest desired game species

Factors with no influence

- Close to my home, which makes it a quick and easy hunting trip
- Private hunting land required a fee
- No other public hunting lands near my home
- Friends or family wanted to hunt there
- The WIA hunt trip was not planned, just happened to come across the land

- To understand **spatial demand for WIAs**, hunters were asked to use a Likert-type scale (1=not important, 2=slightly important, 3=moderately important, 4=very important, 5=critical (would not hunt otherwise)) **to rate the importance of having access to South Dakota WIAs 30 miles or less from their home residence.**

About 20% of respondents answered this question though their home residence zip code did not qualify; hence, data were filtered to only include South Dakota resident hunters (n=439). Overall, **nearly three-quarters of resident hunters reported that having access to WIA lands 30 miles or less from their home residence as moderately important, very important, or critical (would not hunt otherwise)** (see pg. 79).

- To understand the factors that affect **overall hunting experience using South Dakota Walk-In Areas during 2020**, survey participants were asked to use a Likert-type scale (1=not important, 2=slightly important, 3=moderately important, 4=very important, 5=extremely important) **to rate the level of importance of 10 statements.**

Respondents were not asked to rank factors that may affect their overall hunting experiences using South Dakota WIAs during 2020. Based on reported mode counts (Table 14, pg. 80) and proportional responses (Figures 67 – 76, pp. 81 - 90), the list is broadly summarized as follows:

Very important factors

- WIA signage to identify public hunting land is visible and readable
- Land enrolled provides opportunity to walk long distances to get away from roads or other hunters
- Land enrolled is high quality wildlife habitat
- Land enrolled has a high abundance of desired game species

Moderately important factors

- Not seeing other people while hunting on WIAs
- Harvesting game species you would be proud to display

Factors with no importance

- Advertising and marketing seen about hunting expectations on WIAs
- A designated parking area that is not far from hunting area
- Land enrolled that supports the ability of individuals with physical limitations to hunt
- Do not have to walk too far from vehicle to hunt desired game species

- **Survey participants were offered the opportunity to tell GFP if there were other factors that affected their overall hunting experiences (positive or negative) on Walk-In Areas during 2020. About one-third of respondents provided text responses.** To make sense of a large amount of rich and nuanced data, all text responses were coded and grouped by broad themes, recognizing that text comments often include multiple themes so percentages will exceed 100%. All comments are listed in Appendix B.

For text response examples, see pp. 91 - 96:

- Habitat management 39%

- Species management 15%
- Access 14%
- WIA Program 13%
- Crowding or hunting pressure 9%
- Landowner contact 4%
- Hunt interference 3%
- Non-resident concerns 2%
- Law enforcement 1%

Evaluation of WIA and CREP Lands by Game Species

In support of WIA Program decision-making, this survey asked whether a specific species was hunted in 2020 (e.g., upland birds, big game, waterfowl), if they hunted WIA or CREP lands during 2020, and also measured the use of the different land types for various kinds of hunting. The 2020 survey also obtained hunters' assessment of habitat and perceived crowding while hunting on WIA and CREP lands, which have not been measured previously.

Upland Bird Hunting: Grouse, Prairie Chicken, or Partridge

- Overall, **almost one-quarter of hunters** (23% resident and 22% non-resident) **hunted South Dakota grouse, prairie chicken, or partridge during 2020**. This is about an 9% increase from the 2015 survey.

Respondents that did not hunt grouse, prairie chicken, or partridge in South Dakota during 2020 were asked why not. To make sense of a large amount of rich and nuanced data, all text responses (n=1,248) were coded and grouped by broad themes, recognizing that text comments often include multiple themes so percentages will exceed 100%. All comments are listed in Appendix B.

- Not target species 77%
 - Hunting constraints 20%
 - Species population management 13%
 - COVID considerations 7%
- Between 2015 and 2020 surveys, the number of resident and non-resident grouse, prairie chicken, or partridge hunters increased. The mean number of days hunted and estimated total number days hunted also increased between 2015 and 2020.
 - Between 2015 and 2020 surveys, hunting grouse, prairie chicken, or partridge decreased about 18% WIAs and 3% on public lands. Additionally, 54% of survey respondents reported hunting on private lands that do not charge a fee, while 13% hunted on fee-based private lands. In 2015, 66% hunted on private lands.
 - In 2020, on average, hunters spent the greatest percentage of their time (about 44%) hunting grouse, prairie chicken, or partridge on private land (no fees charged), with 23% occurring west of the Missouri River. Similarly, in 2015, on average, hunters spent 45% of their time hunting on private lands.

Upland Bird Hunting: Pheasant

- **In 2020, a majority of hunters (75%) hunted South Dakota pheasant during 2020. This represents a 4% decrease from 2015.**

Respondents that did not hunt pheasant in South Dakota during 2020 were asked why not. To make sense of a large amount of rich and nuanced data, all text responses (n=395) were coded and grouped by broad themes, recognizing that text comments often include multiple themes so percentages will exceed 100%. All comments are listed in Appendix B.

- Not target species 63%
 - Hunting constraints 44%
 - COVID considerations 14%
 - Access or opportunity constraints 13%
 - Crowding or hunting competition pressure 10%
- Between 2015 and 2020 surveys, the estimated total number of days hunting South Dakota pheasant increased for residents, noting the estimated number of resident hunters decreased during the same time period. The number of non-resident hunters also declined over the five-year period; however, the mean number of days hunted increased for both resident and non-resident hunters.
 - Between 2015 and 2020 surveys, pheasant hunting increased by 5% on WIAs and by 6% on public lands. Additionally, 67% of respondents reported hunting on private lands that do not charge a fee, while 20% hunted on fee-based private lands. In 2015, 85% hunted on private lands.
 - In 2020, on average, pheasant hunters spent 44% of their time hunting on private lands that do not charge a fee, of which 33% was east of the Missouri River, and 14% hunted on fee-based private lands. In 2015, on average, pheasant hunters spent 62% of their time hunting on private land.

Walk-In Area and CREP Lands Evaluation: Upland Birds

- Overall, **39% (24% residents and 15% non-residents) hunted grouse, prairie chicken, or partridge on South Dakota WIA or CREP lands during 2020.** This is about a 9% increase from the 2015 survey. The 2015 survey did not ask hunters to evaluate CREP lands.

WIA lands:

- **Overall quality of upland bird habitat on WIA lands:** 39% of hunters rated upland bird habitat on WIA lands as average and 38% as good. This represents a decline of 2% to 3% over the past five years.
- **Importance of WIA lands for 2020 upland bird hunting:** 51% of hunters rated importance of WIA lands for 2020 upland bird hunting as very important (no change from 2015), followed by 22% as moderately important (about a 5% increase from 2015).

- **Overall satisfaction with WIA lands for 2020 upland bird hunting:** 40% of hunters rated overall satisfaction with WIA lands for 2020 upland bird hunting as somewhat satisfied, followed by 19% as very satisfied. Overall satisfaction with WIA lands for upland bird hunting was not measured in 2015.
- **Crowding perception while upland bird hunting on WIA lands:** 49% of hunters rated their perception of crowding while upland bird hunting on WIA lands as not crowded, while half of hunters rated as slightly crowded to too many hunters. Crowding perception while upland bird hunting on WIA lands was not measured in 2015.

CREP lands:

- **Overall quality of upland bird habitat on CREP lands:** 35% of respondents rated upland bird habitat on CREP lands as average and 43% as good. Overall quality of upland bird habitat on CREP lands was not measured in 2015.
- **Importance of CREP lands for 2020 upland bird hunting:** 52% of respondents rated importance of CREP lands for 2020 upland bird hunting as very important and 17% as critical (would not hunt otherwise). This represents about a 3% increase over the past five years.
- **Overall satisfaction with CREP lands for 2020 upland bird hunting:** 40% of respondents rated overall satisfaction with CREP lands for 2020 upland bird hunting as somewhat satisfied and almost one-quarter were very satisfied. Overall satisfaction with WIA lands upland bird hunting was not measured in 2015.
- **Crowding perception while upland bird hunting on CREP lands:** 52% of hunters rated their perception of crowding while upland bird hunting on CREP lands as not crowded, while 57% rated as slightly crowded to too many hunters. Crowding perception while upland bird hunting on WIA lands was not measured in 2015.

Big Game Hunting: Deer

Note: When appropriate data is reported for all strata (all, resident, non-resident); however, the non-resident deer (4%) samples were too small for meaningful statistical analysis at that level and too small to make mathematical comparisons between resident and non-resident strata for big game hunters. To compare 2020 survey results to 2015 survey results, the analysis is at the resident hunter strata level only.

- **Overall, 48% of respondents hunted South Dakota deer during 2020. Of resident big game hunters, 72% hunted deer.**

Respondents that did not hunt deer in South Dakota during 2020 were asked why not. To make sense of a large amount of rich and nuanced data, all text responses (n=795) were coded and grouped by broad themes, recognizing that text comments often include multiple themes so percentages will exceed 100%. All comments are listed in Appendix B.

- Not target species: 73%
 - License or regulation issues: 40%
 - Access or opportunity constraints: 34%
 - Hunting constraints: 27%
 - COVID considerations: 15%
- Between 2015 and 2020 surveys, the number of residents who hunted deer decreased but, on average, the number of days spent hunting increased by three.
 - In 2020, 83% of residents primarily hunted deer on private lands that do not charge a fee, half of which was East of the Missouri River. Residents also hunted deer on WIA lands (32%) and public lands (42%). In 2015, a majority of resident deer hunters (87%) used private land.
 - In 2020, on average, residents spent 24% of their time deer hunting on public land. Resident deer hunters also spent about two-thirds their time hunting on private lands that do not charge a fee. In 2015, on average, resident deer hunters spent 71% of their time hunting on private land.

Big Game Hunting: Antelope

Note: When appropriate data is reported for all strata (all, resident, non-resident); however, the non-resident antelope hunter (1%) sample was too small for meaningful statistical analysis at that level and too small to make mathematical comparisons between resident and non-resident strata for big game hunters. To compare 2020 survey results to 2015 survey results, the analysis is at the resident hunter strata level only.

- **Overall, 18% of respondents indicated they hunted antelope in South Dakota during 2020. Of resident big game hunters, 27% hunted antelope.**

Respondents that did not hunt antelope in South Dakota during 2020 were asked why not. To make sense of a large amount of rich and nuanced data, all text responses (n=1,162) were coded and grouped by broad themes, recognizing that text comments often include multiple themes so percentages will exceed 100%. All comments are listed in Appendix B.

- Not target species 65%
 - License or regulation issues 44%
 - Access or opportunity constraints 34%
 - Habitat and population management 11%
 - COVID considerations 3%
- Between 2015 and 2020 surveys, the number of residents who hunted antelope increased about 20%, but the average number of days spent hunting did not change (i.e., 3 days in both 2015 and 2020).
 - In 2020, about half of resident antelope hunters spent at least some time hunting on WIA lands east and west of the Missouri River, while 38% utilized public lands east and west of

the Missouri River. Similarly, on average, half of resident antelope hunters spent time hunting on private land that does not charge a fee. In 2015, 39% of resident antelope hunted on WIA lands, 39% on public lands, and 59% hunted on private lands.

- In 2020, on average, residents spent 36% of their time hunting antelope on private lands west of the Missouri River that do not charge a fee, 33% on Walk-In Areas west of the Missouri River, and 23% on western public lands. In 2015, on average, resident hunters spent 51% of their time hunting antelope on private land.

Walk-In Area and CREP Lands Evaluation: Big Game

- **Overall, 27% of survey participants indicated they hunted big game (i.e., deer and/or antelope) on WIA and/or CREP lands during 2020.** In 2015, about 45% of hunters reported that they had hunted deer, antelope, and/or wild turkey only on WIA lands (Longmire 2019). The 2015 survey did not ask hunters to evaluate CREP lands.

WIA lands:

- **Overall quality of big game habitat on WIA lands:** 36% of resident hunters rated the quality of big game habitat on WIA lands as average and 38% as good. In 2015, 31% of resident hunters rated big game habitat on WIA lands as fair and 41% as good.
- **Importance of WIA lands for 2020 big game hunting:** 47% of resident hunters rated importance of WIA lands for 2020 big hunting as very important and 34% as critical (would not hunt otherwise). In 2015, 43% of resident hunters rated big game habitat on WIA lands as very important and 31% as critical (would not hunt otherwise).
- **Overall satisfaction with WIA lands for 2020 big game hunting:** 65% of resident hunters rated their overall satisfaction with WIA lands for 2020 big game hunting as somewhat to very satisfied. Overall satisfaction with WIA lands for big game hunting was not measured in 2015.
- **Crowding perception while big game hunting on WIA lands:** 34% of resident hunters rated their perception of crowding while hunting big game on WIA lands during 2020 as slightly crowded and 42% rated moderately crowded to too many hunters. Crowding perception while big game hunting on WIA lands was not measured in 2015.

CREP lands:

- **Overall quality of big game habitat on CREP lands:** 41% of resident hunters rated the quality of big game habitat on CREP lands as average and 49% as good to excellent. Overall quality of big game habitat on CREP lands was not measured in 2015.
- **Importance of CREP lands for 2020 big game hunting:** 32% of resident hunters rated importance of CREP lands for 2020 big hunting as slightly to moderately important and 62% as very important to critical (would not hunt otherwise). In 2015, 28% of resident hunters

rated big game habitat on CREP lands as very important and 18% as critical (would not hunt otherwise).

- **Overall satisfaction with CREP lands for 2020 big game hunting:** 59% of resident hunters rated their overall satisfaction with CREP lands for 2020 big game hunting as somewhat satisfied to very satisfied, while almost one-fifth rated somewhat to very dissatisfied. Overall quality of big game habitat on CREP lands was not measured in 2015.
- **Crowding perception while big game hunting on CREP lands:** 31% of resident hunters rated their perception of crowding while hunting big game on CREP lands during 2020 as slightly crowded and 33% as moderately crowded to too many hunters. Crowding perception on CREP lands was not measured in 2015.

Waterfowl Hunting

Note: Due to small and fluctuating samples sizes (for both 2015 and 2020 surveys), data should be cautiously interpreted and findings carefully applied.

- **33% of respondents hunted waterfowl in South Dakota during 2020. This is about a 18% increase from the 2015 survey.**

Respondents that did not hunt waterfowl in South Dakota during 2020 were asked why not. To make sense of a large amount of rich and nuanced data, all text responses (n=950) were coded and grouped by broad themes, recognizing that text comments often include multiple themes so percentages will exceed 100%. All comments are listed in Appendix B.

- Not target species 73%
 - License or regulation issues 64%
 - Access or opportunity constraints 57%
 - Hunting constraints 34%
 - Habitat and population management 4%
 - COVID considerations 1%
- Between 2015 and 2020 surveys, the number of residents who hunted waterfowl increased minimally (i.e., 20 participants) and non-resident hunters increased by 294. The mean number of days residents spent hunting waterfowl increased by one day and there was no change (i.e., 5 days average) for non-resident hunters between 2015 and 2020.
 - In 2020 about one-quarter of waterfowl hunters spent at least some time hunting on WIAs and just over half hunted waterfowl on public lands, while 64% spent time hunting on private lands that do not charge a fee. In 2015, on average, 21% spent time hunting waterfowl on WIAs, 78% spent at least some time hunting waterfowl on private land, and 59% spent time hunting waterfowl on public land.
 - On average, waterfowl hunters spent 29% of their time waterfowl hunting on public lands, while 47% spent their time hunting on private lands that do not charge a fee. In 2015, on average, hunters spent 54% of their time hunting waterfowl on private land.

Walk-In Area and CREP Lands Evaluation: Waterfowl

Note: Though this sample is evenly split between resident and non-resident waterfowl hunters, the overall sample number was too small for meaningful statistical analysis and too small to make mathematical comparisons between resident and non-resident strata for waterfowl hunters. Findings are limited and should be carefully interpreted and applied.

- **About 10% (n=195) of hunters indicated they hunted waterfowl on WIA or CREP lands during 2020.** In 2015, 21% of hunters reported spending at least some time hunting waterfowl on WIA lands. The 2015 survey did not ask hunters to evaluate CREP lands.

WIA lands:

- **Overall quality of waterfowl habitat on WIA lands:** one-third of hunters rated waterfowl habitat on WIA lands as average but 62% rated as good or excellent. In 2015, 31% of respondents rated waterfowl habitat on WIA lands as fair and 42% as good.
- **Importance of WIA lands for 2020 waterfowl hunting:** 63% of respondents rated importance of WIA lands for 2020 waterfowl hunting as very important and 17% rated as critical (would not hunt otherwise). In 2015, overall, 54% of respondents rated importance of WIA lands for 2020 waterfowl hunting as very important and 24% as critical (would not hunt otherwise).
- **Overall satisfaction with WIA lands for 2020 waterfowl hunting:** 45% of hunters rated overall satisfaction with WIA lands for 2020 waterfowl hunting as somewhat satisfied and 31% as very satisfied. Overall satisfaction with WIA lands for waterfowl hunting was not measured in 2015.
- **Crowding perception while waterfowl hunting on WIA lands:** 58% of survey participants rated their perception of crowding while waterfowl hunting on WIA lands as not crowded and 22% rated as slightly crowded, while 18% rated as moderately crowded to too many hunters. Crowding perception while waterfowl hunting on WIA lands was not measured in 2015.

CREP lands:

- **Overall quality of waterfowl habitat on CREP lands:** one-third of hunters rated waterfowl habitat on CREP lands as average and 62% rated as good or excellent. Overall waterfowl habitat quality rating on CREP lands was not measured in 2015.
- **Importance of CREP lands for 2020 waterfowl hunting:** 56% of hunters rated importance of WIA lands for 2020 waterfowl hunting as very important and 17% rated as critical (would not hunt otherwise). In 2015, overall, 63% of respondents rated importance of CREP lands for 2020 waterfowl hunting as very important and 12% as critical (would not hunt otherwise).

- **Overall satisfaction with CREP lands for 2020 waterfowl hunting:** 46% of hunters rated overall satisfaction with CREP lands for 2020 waterfowl hunting as somewhat satisfied and 30% rated as very satisfied. Overall satisfaction with CREP lands for waterfowl hunting was not measured in 2015.
- **Crowding perception while waterfowl hunting on CREP lands:** 58% of hunters rated their perception of crowding while waterfowl hunting on CREP lands as not crowded, while 23% rated as slightly crowded and 16% rated as moderately crowded to too many hunters. Crowding perception while waterfowl hunting on CREP lands was not measured in 2015.

Closing Question Comments

About 31% (19% resident, 12% non-resident) of survey participants provided additional text responses. All text responses are listed in Appendix C. The following themes and proportion of text coverage emerged. For text response examples, see pp. 97 - 110:

- WIA Program 38%
- Habitat management 22%
- Access 9%
- Species management 9%
- Non-resident 7%
- Crowding or hunting pressure 6%
- Rules and regulations 4%
- Licensing 3%
- Other public land <1%
- Landowner contact <1%
- Law enforcement <1%
- COVID-19 <1%
- Safety <1%